DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 742 FL 020 939

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TITLE Quis Custodiet...? Errors in Guides to English Usage for Hong Kong Students.
REPORT NO ISSN-1015-2059
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 15p.; For the serial issue from which this paper is analyzed, see FL 020 934.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Hongkong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching; v12 p63-76 Apr 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; *Language Patterns; Language Research; Language Usage; *Reference Materials; *Study Guides
IDENTIFIERS *Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

A discussion of guides to English usage intended for Hong Kong speakers of English as a Second Language offers general comments on such guides, often written in Chinese and less commonly written in English, and more specific comments on one guide, written in English. The latter guide was analyzed for errors and misleading information. A large number of errors was found, many of which reflected and reinforced an emerging local pseudo-standard of usage. Common problems found included: lack of clear rationale or consistency in the selection of entries; use of alphabetical sequence for entries; use of archaic or heavily literary style of English; recommendations for informal usage in formal contexts; usage that is unfamiliar to native speakers; combination of different usages in one entry; and proofreading and grammatical errors. Suggested explanations for the high error content include: limited exposure of the authors and proofreaders to natively-spoken English; overconfidence; cultural objections to proofreading; lack of interest in quality; and little attention paid to the guides by teachers. Production of such guides by native speakers of English is recommended. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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HONGKONG PAPERS IN LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE TEACHING 12 (APRIL 1989) ISSN 1015-2059

ED354742

QUIS CUSTODIET ...?
ERRORS IN GUIDES TO ENGLISH USAGE FOR HONG KONG STUDENTS

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Background

In Hong Kong, as in other territories where English is an important second or auxiliary language, students find available to them many books purporting to provide accurate information about the details of English usage. This paper deals with the patterning and frequency of the errors found in some books of this kind, and more specifically with those found in the 1951/1988 book by Fang Lo-Tien.

In the case of Hong Kong, some of the books are produced locally, others in the People's Republic of China. Since most students in both territories have Chinese - though typically different dialects - as their first language, the prevailing patterns of characteristic errors and learning difficulties are similar (though not identical). Books produced in China are thus of use in Hong Kong also.

In these books, the text is usually in Chinese: the authors are normally themselves ethnic Chinese, and presumably believe - reasonably - that their student readers will find discussion of linguistic matters more readily comprehensible in their first language. It is only occasionally that the actual text of such a book - perhaps one aimed at more advanced students, or one produced by a non-Chinese - is written in English. We look briefly at one such book below.

The range of topics covered by these books is wide; some of them deal with idioms (always a problem for learners); others with prepositions, phrasal verbs and other aspects of grammar; others with vocabulary. A number of them, such as the main one analysed in this present paper, simply list a large number of English expressions (often organised alphabetically), furnish one or more Chinese equivalents for each, and give one or two English sentences, with Chinese translations, as examples. In a further section, this may be repeated, commencing with common Chinese expressions and indicating how to translate them into English.

Comments: General

One can readily anticipate problems arising with such books. Most of the authors are themselves ethnic Chinese, and many of them have learned their English very largely in Hong Kong or in China. Their contact with native speakers of English has not always been very extensive, and the English to which they have been exposed has thus itself been localised in character. Their own teachers were probably not in a position to inform them of when their usage was non-standard. Furthermore, owing to the importance in Chinese society of preserving 'face', authors of this nature (and their teachers before them) may well have resisted any attempts made by native speakers (or others with a more secure grasp of English) to 'correct' the local or non-

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standard features of their usage. They are very unlikely to have actively sought correction (or even proof-reading) by such people.

The authors sometimes give prominence to their own qualifications on the covers and title pages of their books (a good example is Chiu 1983). Students in this region are in most cases already unduly impressed by paper qualifications, and are often too ready to believe that anything said by a teacher must be true; and this surely encourages them to assume that all the information given must be correct and reliable. In fact, tertiary teachers of English often find that it is almost impossible to convince students that what they have previously learned from books such as these (or even what their secondary school English teachers have taught them) could possibly be wrong.

In some circumstances, all this might not be disastrous. For instance, if the information given by these books was very largely accurate, there would be no cause for alarm. If, on the other hand, the information related openly not to the international exonormative standard variety, but to a genuine emerging local Hong Kong standard with its own viability, any disparities between the books and the international standard forms would again not matter much, if at all. The information provided would presumably be largely (though perhaps not entirely) accurate as far as the local standard was concerned.

Unfortunately, neither of these situations obtains. Any native speaker of English or any more competent non-native speaker who looks at any of these books will at once notice that a substantial minority of the English sentences given are non-standard. Sometimes the error is minor and there is no problem with respect to the intelligibility of the sentence (though even in these cases the negative impression given as to the level of the writer's English might be very damaging, especially cumulatively). In other cases there is a global error, often interfering with intelligibility to the extent that the sentence might be materially misunderstood or else not understood. Bilingual readers may also notice cases where the English and the Chinese do not appear to be genuinely equivalent.

It should be noted that all this applies to works such as Chiu 1983 (see below) as well as to those of the type exemplified by Fang 1988. Chiu often recommends non-standard usage or cites it as if it were standard; furthermore, the English of his own text contains a fairly large number of errors.

In addition, one is forced to ask if Hong Kong can possibly afford to develop a local standard English of its own. As I have argued elsewhere (Newbrook 1988, etc.), the value of English as far as Hong Kong is concerned relates largely to the contact which it provides with the non-Chinese world. Its internal functions within local society are strictly limited. There is thus very little to be gained, and much to be lost, by allowing or encouraging a local standard (or an uncodified or semi-codified pseudo-standard) to develop, especially given that most of the salient features of local English usage differentiate it from ALL of the mainstream standard varieties of the language (which are themselves becoming increasingly similar to each other). At worst, the stabilisation of 'Hong Kong English' could make the task of students who needed or wished to acquire standard English almost impossible, owing to the fossilising of local forms learned at an early age in the mistaken belief that they were standard (this already happens to a certain extent). English is never likely to be used internally to anything like a sufficient extent, nor is it generally known to a high enough standard of fluency and general competence, for a local standard to obtain a firm basis for development. In the face of these considerations, it seems clear that deviations from the international standard must be regarded simply as errors in a Hong Kong context. This situation must be distinguished from that of places like Singapore, where English is of considerable (not to say crucial) significance in the internal life of the local community, where

levels of fluency are much higher, and where, as a result, conditions at least might be held to support the establishment of a local standard variety rather than continuing adherence to the British or international norm (though the adoption of a local norm might still be deemed unwise on other grounds).

Of course, saying that local usage should be perceived for the most part in terms of learner error rather than of legitimate variation is not to say that there is not a fairly homogeneous pattern of errors characteristically made in Hong Kong and less usual elsewhere. Some scholars (e.g. Luke & Richards 1982:56; Tongue: personal comment) have eschewed the term Hong Kong English, and seem to believe (or to have believed) that such a pattern can exist only where a variety is frequently used internally in the society in a wide range of domains, fairly consciously institutionalised, etc. - i.e., in a second rather than a foreign-language situation, as for instance in Singapore. In fact, there certainly is such a pattern of usage in Hong Kong, so marked that it is often easy to identify a piece of English as having been produced by a Hong Kong person (see Newbrook 1988, forthcoming a). Indeed, this makes it even more difficult for Hong Kong learners to acquire standard English; almost everyone else they know is making the same errors (I am assuming that this is an appropriate term, in the light of the above) as themselves.

I am not, of course, suggesting that only error-free English is acceptable or to be anticipated in a Hong Kong context. Few students will ever achieve this, especially given the lack of support for the use of English outside the classroom. However, the international standard - not a local pseudo-standard - is surely the only reasonable target variety.

Comments: Specific

The books discussed here can be divided into a number of types on the basis of selection and treatment of subject matter, general approach, and author's background:

1) Some books by local authors, for instance Chiu 1983, actually discuss and analyse what the authors believe to be characteristic local errors. Chiu's book is widely available in Hong Kong bookshops and has been reprinted yearly since it first appeared. It is aimed at those students who are about to take the Hong Kong Certificate examination in English, and covers 860 errors or groups of associated errors, in each case exemplifying and briefly explaining the nature of what Chiu considers a common local error. Although this present paper does not focus upon the (often misleading) correction of errors in works of this nature, a detailed analysis of Chiu 1983 and/or similar books would be of great interest.

2) Occasionally one comes across a book of this kind, dealing explicitly with errors, which has been produced by a local scholar of much higher proficiency in English (and/or linguistics), and is thus much more accurate and reliable. Elsewhere (Newbrook forthcoming b & c), I have analysed one such book (Tse 1988), and have compared it with one of the few works of this nature prepared by a native speaker of English (Newbrook forthcoming d; but see also 3) below). Tse's book is a small, slim volume aimed at late-secondary school students, covering 90 carefully selected errors in ten broad linguistic categories and explaining how to avoid them. Since publication it has sold very successfully, both to secondary and to tertiary students seeking help with the details of their English. Tse himself (a lecturer at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong) is unusually well versed in English by Hong Kong standards, and the focus of my paper is upon the extent to which he and I agree or disagree in respect of the relative salience of forms which we both identify as errors. Tse very occasionally identifies what appears to be standard usage as non-

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standard; but in no case does he recommend or cite as standard any form which is in fact non-standard.

3) Even more reliable, of course, are the few books of this nature produced by native speakers. So far the best of these is Bunton 1989. Bunton is a long-term Hong Kong resident, an experienced teacher and examiner, and a Cantonese speaker. His work deals with over 300 common local errors, arranged alphabetically under key-words. There are also exercises with keys (much more extensive than those in Tse 1988), checklists of common instances of various types of error, and a glossary. Bunton provides brief discussions of the nature of the errors and frequently offers explanations of their origins. Where first-language interference appears to be involved, he refers helpfully to the equivalent Cantonese expressions.

In his introduction Bunton makes a number of very telling points. For instance, he notes that books (even by native speakers) which list common learner errors without reference to specific countries are of limited use locally, since a large majority of the errors which are characteristic of Hong Kong are in fact largely confined to Hong Kong, and thus are not generally included in such books. Furthermore, he argues persuasively that it is not really possible to avoid presenting local errors in discussion (however much one may fear re-inforcing them), since many of them are so prevalent locally that even very proficient learners will assume that they are acceptable alternatives to the genuine standard form unless the fact that this is not the case is made explicit. Bunton states that his book is not aimed at any particular type of student, noting correctly that many of the errors persist in the usage of highly educated adult users of English in Hong Kong. However, his selection reflects a special (but not exclusive) concern with those errors which are more characteristic of students at lower educational levels (mid-secondary, etc.).

Bunton admits that his format excludes certain kinds of specifically grammatical error which cannot readily be listed under key-words. He exemplifies this with the best known relative clause errors, and also refers to tenses and concord. This seems quite a serious omission, but at least it is acknowledged. It must be admitted that classifying and presenting grammatical errors is not easy; and Bunton does in fact succeed in finding key-words for some of these. Given this fairly major constraint, however, the actual selection of errors seems very reasonable. There are not very many obvious omissions or strange inclusions, and the degree of overlap with the relevant sections of Newbrook forthcoming d is high (the latter work is wider in scope, including as it does purely grammatical errors and also phonological errors, both specific and general).

Items which seem to be important but which are omitted, in some cases surprisingly, include misuses of terms like actually, alphabet (to mean 'letter'), already, audience ('member of the audience'), besides ('moreover'), bias/discriminate towards ('...against'), Christian ('Protestant'), consist of/in ('include'), drop/jop down ('jot down'), exist, foreigner ('non-Chinese', 'westerner'), gain/get ('have'), interesting/interested (as in "I am ..."), like to ('tend to'), master or can master ('command'), neglect ('ignore'), never mind ('it's OK',etc.), nevertheless/yet ('but'), on the contrary ('in contrast'), on the other hand ('moreover'), replace/substitute (and replace/act in a role, etc.), runner-up, saying ('statement'), starting from ... to ('from ...to'), surely ('certainly'), totally ('in all'), used to/be used to, youth (countable), and perhaps also ambiguous, aspect, fact, kind/sort/type, subjective, etc. On the other hand, Bunton includes a number of errors which are not found in Newbrook forthcoming d (or in any other relevant work known to me) but which are clearly worth including.

As one would expect, Bunton makes no genuine errors with respect to usage; there is no endorsement of local non-standardisms, and there are no cases of where a form which is in fact standard is rejected. There are, however, a few cases where Bunton seems not to have noticed

the existence of a convenient standard variant which could usefully be recommended. For instance, he fails to mention this is because when discouraging it is because (under because). Occasionally an item is listed under an unhelpful key-word, as where the construction use X to Y is listed under point rather than use, merely because point is one of the very many verbs which can occur in the 'Y' position in this structure.

4) the majority of books used in this context by Hong Kong students are, however, of a more basic (and less reliable) nature, seldom discussing errors explicitly and simply offering advice in the form of suggested translations and writing strategies. I look here at a typical work of this nature, Fang 1988 (first edition 1951). In this book the text itself is minimal; there are no explanations at all of the principles behind the examples given. Furthermore, as intimated, there is no actual discussion of local errors; the English expressions given are simply rendered into Chinese, with examples (usually two, occasionally one, or three or more, per entry), and vice versa. Fang's book is openly aimed at translators, as he announces in his introduction and as the title suggests; and it is widely used by students up to and including tertiary level, for instance by students of Translation and Interpretation at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong. The work has gone through nineteen print runs and, crucially, has been revised significantly on two occasions. It has sold approximately 51,000 copies altogether.

I focus here upon the first section, English-Chinese (pp 1-150; 656 entries in all). I stress at the outset that this section and indeed the book as a whole are, naturally, by no means useless. In many cases the usage exemplified is common in native-speaker English and is unlikely already to be sufficiently familiar to most students. In certain cases, such as those of so that and so...that (entries 519-521), the examples given could well help to clear up common and fairly damaging cases of confusion[1]. Reasonably, the work focuses upon 'function' words rather than content words (Fang makes this explicit); these are in general much more troublesome for learners and are harder to learn from a dictionary. The criticisms which follow, while often serious, should be read in the light of the above positive points.

I would level at Fang 1988 (and, to varying degrees, at many similar books) the following major criticisms:

a) It is far from clear how exactly the list of entries was arrived at and why these 656 entries were thought to be those most in need of address. In many cases the selection seems rather unsystematic, and one can readily think of expressions (often associated with those included) which appear to be of equal or greater importance but which have been omitted. Fang admits that the method of collection was somewhat haphazard.

b) An alphabetic sequence is not necessarily the best format; if it is felt to be the best in the circumstances, cross-referencing between associated entries which are not alphabetically adjacent might be in order. This failing is, in fact, not unusual in such books; Chiu 1983 discusses long lists of errors in unhelpful sequences determined in the same kind of way.

c) In many cases the English given is archaic or heavily literary/poetic in style. If used in informal writing or conversation, it would engender in listeners a very strange impression of the writer/speaker. In most cases the usage was outdated even in 1951 when the first edition appeared. For instance, entry 569 recommends the use of a twelve-month ('a year') and that day year ('a year from that day')[2]; entry 117 recommends fall among ('encounter')[3]; etc.

d) In contrast, some entries recommend highly informal usage in what appears to be a formal context. For instance, entry 347 recommends the use of a bit (a bit slower) in an otherwise

formal sentence involving the rather archaic no X but Y construction (no watch is so accurate but it ...)[4]. This is characteristic of the style-mixing, and the misapprehension of the stylistic level of specific expressions, which permeate much Hong Kong writing in English.

e) In some cases, the English expression listed appears not to exist, or at least to be very unusual. For example, entry 100 deals with during good behaviour, which strikes most native speakers as very unfamiliar[5].

f) In some cases the entry is misleading. For instance, entry 1 may suggest to the reader that archaic/dialectal English a- in a-thinking, etc., is the same morpheme as the indefinite article a; they are treated together in the same entry[6].

g) In some cases, a Chinese expression which corresponds with two or more English expressions is given in translation of these English expressions, without any indication that the English expressions, while having some words in common, are not synonymous. The best example is entry 605, dealing with used to[7]. Fang appears not to realise that the difference between used to (always past; followed by stem form) and be used to (any tense; followed by -ing form) is important in English (as it certainly is), or even that they are not synonymous. He has been misled by the Chinese and/or by the prevailing local errors involving these two expressions. This sort of gross error is understandable in a student, but seems most unfortunate in a teacher and author, particularly where, as here, the effect is that students are misled and their errors re-inforced.

h) There are very many errors in the English examples, some relevant to the point at issue and some involving another, irrelevant feature of the sentence given. Some of these errors are simply careless (no plural -s, etc.), suggesting that little or no proof-reading has been done (despite the long period since the first edition), or else that Fang's own grasp of some of the basics of English grammar is itself somewhat insecure. Others involve repeated errors with the use of articles and verb tenses (especially the simple present used in place of the present perfect or the present progressive); and also more complex and specific grammatical and lexical errors of the types often found locally (alphabet for letter in entry 284[8], may be for maybe in entry 300[9], take for eat in entry 306[10], redundant in the world in entry 546[11], positive ever in entry 496[12], go for come in entry 505[13], etc.). Students of 'Hong Kong English' will note that many if not most of the errors exemplified are not idiosyncratic, but are characteristic local errors found in the work of a large number (often, a majority) of Hong Kong students.

Owing to doubts about exactly what Fang intends in some awkward cases, and the undoubted presence of 'borderline' cases, it is difficult to give a precise figure for the number of errors; but there appear to be over 150 sheer errors of the types listed above, and around 60 cases of strange, clumsy or unintentionally ambiguous usage (some of which might count as errors on a less generous appraisal)[14]. This works out to one error/piece of poor usage per 3 entries; around one per 6 sentences given; and over one per page of text. There is no evidence that this work is particularly 'bad' in this respect; this is perhaps the typical level of error in books of this kind.

The student who uses Fang 1988 cannot, of course, know that there are so many errors in the English. Indeed, students would probably be very surprised to learn that there are so many, given the exaggerated respect afforded local teachers (and other authorities such as local textbook writers) by students in Hong Kong and other Chinese communities (see above). Few students will have access to the comments of educated native speakers or of others who will be able to inform them of the true situation. Even if students do become aware that there are errors, they will be unable to tell where these are to be found - especially when the errors are not

idiosyncratic, but characteristically local - unless they are given a detailed breakdown. Their confidence in the entire work will thus be undermined - perhaps unfairly. Alternatively, they may, as noted above, simply refuse to believe the information that the local usage recommended by the book is non-standard.

In respect of this last point, it should be pointed out in addition that many of the locally-produced books which focus on errors more explicitly (such as Chiu 1983) not only themselves include and indeed recommend errors, but in some cases actually describe as incorrect forms which are in fact standard usage. In combination with the above, this clearly encourages the presumably undesirable development of a local pseudo-standard. Of course, both patterns - the endorsement of local forms and, on occasion, the deprecation of internationally accepted usage - are also found in the Hong Kong classroom.

Comments: Summary

I have outlined here various problems arising with Fang 1988 (and with similar books). The last two seem to be the most serious and damaging of these. Fairly obviously, the large number of errors is extremely alarming. In the first place, the dissemination of errors, even where these are random or idiosyncratic errors confined to one or a few such writers, is surely unfortunate. More importantly, many of the errors involved are features of the emerging Hong Kong pseudo-standard (see above), and works such as Fang 1988 are thus implicated in the perpetuation and re-inforcement of this variety. Features of this type are learned from various sources, most obviously from local teachers and locally written material; but those which are used or even endorsed by textbook writers will surely be passed on all the more effectively through successive generations of users, and in the end will become virtually ineradicable.

Explanation

It is of some interest to consider the reasons behind the huge number of errors. One might reasonably ask how it came about that a work which contains so many errors was accepted by publishers (or indeed commissioned in the first place from the author, if it could have been determined at the time on the evidence of earlier work that he was liable to make so many errors); that it was not effectively proof-read; and that it then circulated for so many years and was reprinted, and indeed revised extensively on two occasions, without these errors being corrected; and all this in a territory where English is an official language and was, at the time of initial publication, the sole official language. It should be noted that Fang, in his introduction, invites comment and criticism from readers. On the face of it, it seems that little criticism has been received, or that what has been received has come from sources less well-informed than Fang himself and has thus been misleading or at least unhelpful (one hopes that well-informed criticism has not been ignored).

The reasons for all this seem to involve the more general mechanisms behind the perpetuation of the at times alarmingly low standard of official and 'educated' English in Hong Kong.

a) As noted above, the authors of such works are, almost of necessity, nearly all themselves Chinese, and, owing to the nature of the Hong Kong education system, are taught English by other Chinese. They have limited exposure to native-speaker usage and in all likelihood pay little attention to the details of usage when reading works written in standard English. As a

result of this, they are often insufficiently sensitive to differences between varieties of English. It seems to me, for instance, that very few local users of English, even those who have reached high educational levels, are able to manipulate stylistic differences accurately; and the notion of a distinction between standard and non-standard varieties of the language is often totally unfamiliar even to final year English majors at university. In students' minds there is often only the simple, monolithic concept of 'English'. Naturally enough, the actual usage associated with this concept is the local usage which students have acquired. If this is perceived in any more specific terms, perhaps after exposure to other forms of English, it is still likely to be seen as 'normal' English, and other varieties - including even the exonormative standard - rejected or deprecated as 'unfamiliar', 'strange', etc. (I have had direct experience of this reaction).

b) Given this, Hong Kong users of English, once past a certain level of achievement, are unlikely to seek correction or advice, or even to submit their English to proof-reading. They feel that they already know English well enough to avoid serious amounts of error; they are confident - in some cases even fairly fluent - users of the local variety of English, which they perceive simply as 'English'. For instance, a student whom I once interviewed stated her belief that there could be at most two or three errors in a page of English which she had written. In fact the page contained about forty non-standardisms. Most of these were characteristically local rather than idiosyncratic, and it was therefore to be expected that the student perceived herself as highly competent in English. She had certainly been so perceived by other Hong Kong people who had assessed her in the past for suitability for employment in positions requiring the use of English (see below on this). Even native speakers may have considered her applications favourably (and may have refrained from depressing her by pointing out her errors); given the low overall level of English in Hong Kong, better candidates may not have been available locally. Naturally, those learners who have reached a level where they are able to publish books about English usage are likely to have an even higher opinion of their own ability. Fang himself, as noted, invited criticism in his introduction; but one might reasonably ask why he did not submit the work to a range of competent proof-readers before publication.

It should be noted in this context that many of the errors in Fang's English examples are grammatical in character; and it is clear that complacency over English amongst educated Hong Kong Chinese applies particularly to grammar. This is an example of a very salient feature of Hong Kong students' beliefs about English, namely misperception of their own relative success or lack thereof in acquiring various features or modes of the language. Another obvious example of this, though one which is scarely relevant here, involves a measure of complacency about students' written English in general, as opposed to their speech. Tertiary students tend to assume that their written English is still more impressive than their spoken, which may have been the case during their secondary school years, but which, owing to the multitude of unnoticed grammatical errors, is most unlikely to be the case at this later stage.

The relative lack of perceived urgency with respect to grammar is reflected in Fang's treatment of his topics in terms of vocabulary items, albeit for the most part 'function' words, rather than of the grammatical structures in which they appear. This reflects the common belief of students that the limited size of their vocabulary is their most serious problem with English. Students are much more likely to buy a book such as Fang 1988 with a view to broadening their vocabulary than with the intention of improving their use of words which they know already, still less of improving their grasp of English grammar. They generally believe, quite wrongly, that grammar is much less of a problem for them, basically because their teachers have typically been unable, unwilling or insufficiently motivated to correct grammatical errors. In general, the faulty perception by Hong Kong students both of the degree to which their English is non-standard and

of the main loci of their difficulties is a serious problem; and its effects clearly extend to the work of textbook writers as well as that of students themselves.

c) Given the difficulty of obtaining willing and suitably qualified native speakers, in some domains at least, such proof-reading as is done is in many cases the work of other Hong Kong Chinese, more highly qualified in English or perceived as such. These latter may in fact be clearly 'better at English' (though this is not always the case), and as a result they themselves, and in addition their subordinates, may believe that their grasp of English is very sound and that their judgements (which are in fact often misleading) are reliable. Some such people in fact take it upon themselves to give their subordinates unsolicited and often erroneous instruction on the details of English usage, endorsing their own favoured usage, which itself is often non-standard. Success in Hong Kong English Language examinations and general academic prowess are not guarantees of a high standard of accuracy in English.

d) In this context, there is evidence that even those Hong Kong users of English whose own English is largely error-free (or at least of a standard noticeably higher than average) are mostly much less proficient at correcting others' errors than at producing their own relatively accurate texts. How this can be is not entirely clear. It may be simply that these users of English happen to have had unusually well-informed teachers, possibly mainly native speakers, and thus have learned near-standard patterns of usage; some have studied in native-speaker communities overseas or in exclusive local schools where the use of English is strongly encouraged and where contact with native speakers is frequent. Such exposure does not necessarily mean that these individuals have any very clear perception of which alternative patterns, which they themselves do not use, are also standard, and which are not. Indeed, in some cases they may have had limited exposure to local non-standard patterns of usage, since they have been educated either outside Hong Kong or in a near-standard-English environment, and since even local non-standard English is very seldom to be heard in Hong Kong outside the classroom.

e) Even if a proof-reading service is offered by native speakers, the offer may not be taken up, perhaps owing to complacency, fear of loss of face (see above), or both. As noted, many Hong Kong writers and students apparently think (or like to think) that their English is already largely standard. They would thus feel insulted if asked to submit it to a non-Chinese for proof-reading. Those who are, in contrast, aware at least of the possibility of their usage being seriously divergent from an international norm might fear the loss of face which might be associated with the discovery of many errors by such a proof-reader. In addition, senior local personnel might feel offended at being passed over for this task in favour of 'foreigners'. These attitudes are all certainly quite common, despite much overtly deferential behaviour directed at native speakers of English.

f) When a native speaker's advice is sought, it may still not be accepted or believed (see above). It is common for native speakers who are asked to proof-read passages to find that the original writers dispute their judgements. One suspects that the request is sometimes made in the first place more out of concern for appearances than out of a genuine desire to improve the level of the English or to obtain more information about English.

g) In fact, there is some evidence that many Hong Kong users of English are not really interested in improving their level of accuracy. This applies in particular to students, most of whom have so far used English mainly in artificial classroom settings, where the teacher and other students were all Chinese, and where, as a consequence, errors in usage, unless very blatant or directly relevant to what was being taught, passed unnoticed or at any rate were not singled out for comment. Some other learners are in a similar position, in as much as they have been using English mainly in application letters for jobs, and also in office memos and other such

establishment-internal documents; again, the readers of such material are mostly Chinese. It is a sociolinguistic commonplace (see, e.g., Trudgill 1983:200) that people will not in general be sufficiently motivated to learn new language varieties, including new dialects of languages which they already know (or think they know), unless they can see that they are likely to succeed in learning these varieties and that material benefits are likely to accrue to them as a result. If this is not the case the effort involved is typically perceived to be too great, especially when the new variety and the one which the speakers in question already command are very similar and differ only in subtle ways which generate interference and confusion. We may add that this effect will be re-inforced in cases such as that of Hong Kong, where many of the features of English which are specifically local relate to the structure of the students' first and dominant language, and thus make it easier for them to acquire and use this variety than to learn a standard variety with a structure which is more alien and awkward for them.

What strikes Hong Kong learners of English as really important, practically speaking, is probably simply acquiring the ability to express themselves in 'English' - no internal complexity is imagined - adequately for the internal functions outlined above (i.e. so that another Hong Kong Chinese can understand them). If there is any idea of impressing a reader with their accuracy or with 'good English' more generally, the imagined reader is almost certainly a fellow Chinese, more proficient in English but still a member of their own ethnic and linguistic group. Impressing such people will usually suffice for obtaining the rewards associated with knowledge of English. The statement 'but it's acceptable HERE' is sometimes heard in this context when a piece of English is criticised. Higher standards of accuracy are not perceived as necessary and the effort involved is thus not perceived as worthwhile. In the same way, one reason for students' preferring Chinese to expatriate tutors, even in settings where the use of English is more or less mandatory, lies in their awareness that when using English it is much harder to impress a native speaker than to impress a fellow Chinese (and it may even be difficult to make oneself understood); and some perceive the task of impressing a gwai-lo as one with which they would prefer never to be confronted, and which they hope and expect to avoid in the longer term.

I stress that I am not criticising students for adopting this sort of (partly subconscious) attitude. It may well be that their perception of the situation and its requirements is correct, and that there really is no need for most of them to attain a higher level of accuracy in English. In these circumstances, however, they cannot expect to impress or even to satisfy educated native speakers with whom they come in contact; and any of them who pursue studies in English-speaking countries or apply for jobs involving heavy contact with native speakers will find that they have to revise their attitude and upgrade their English, perhaps at rather short notice and at a relatively advanced age where such adjustment is not easy. Perhaps a clearer perception of students' likely goals (both by teachers and by the students themselves) would help students and educators to come to a reasonable decision as to the level of accuracy to be sought, given each student's goals and expectations.

h) Books of this nature are typically bought and used by students on an individual and private basis. They are seldom adopted as classroom texts by teachers. As a result of this, it is only rarely that they come to the attention of teachers. If teachers at least paid more attention to books of this kind, some of the errors would probably be spotted by those teachers whose own awareness of the status of features of English usage was highest (or, of course, by the small but not negligible body of native speakers teaching in Hong Kong). Corrections would thus be more likely to reach the publishers. Even then few teachers might take the trouble to write to the publishers; the usual response to finding errors would surely be either to correct the student on the spot or to discourage use of the book. Given continued sales, it is clear that this last, at any rate,

has not occurred much; or that any such discouragement has been ineffective. See above on Fang's apparently fruitless request for criticism and comment.

Conclusion and recommendations

Some of these points are obvious enough, indeed almost platitudinous. It is, however, much more difficult to see how problems of this nature should be remedied. One might argue that the general level of competence among teachers of English and textbook writers, in Hong Kong particularly, ought to be and could be raised; but any programme aimed at achieving this would undoubtedly be expensive and prolonged. In the shorter term, it seems desirable to persuade those who prepare such books to submit them to proof-reading (by suitably qualified native speakers, etc.), and to accept the emendations which these judges suggest. Such a programme might, however, fall foul of the 'preservation of face' syndrome mentioned above. Some teachers or writers may not be happy to admit that their own English requires checking, or that they make so many errors; in some cases teachers (and even students) may adopt dogmatic and even belligerent attitudes to correction of their errors. As noted above, they may even believe that the new forms which they are now being asked to learn are 'strange', perhaps in fact 'wrong', and may be non-standardisms local to the instructor's home area. It may be hoped and expected, however, that these attitudes will be displayed by minority groups only, and that most local teachers and students will adopt more positive approaches to such information.

Perhaps the best course is for native speakers of English - preferably bilingual, but, if not, in co-operation with bilingual Chinese - to produce such books; particularly those dealing overtly with local errors, to which they will usually be much more sensitive. The information imbibed by students - if it is accepted at points where it contradicts local impressions - will thus be more authoritative and very largely correct. Bunton 1989 has already shown the scope for improvement here; it is much the most reliable work of its kind ever produced. Indeed, this work - and also Newbrook (forthcoming d) - may be seen as contributions to the proposed enterprise.

NOTES

Except where indicated, the focus of Fang's entry is upon the matter in respect of which the entry is discussed here. Where two matters are raised here, the note indicates which of them is Fang's focus (as in note 2).

1. I started early SO THAT I might be in time for the train.(519)
   I got up SO early THAT I was in time. (520)
   This book is SO difficult THAT I cannot understand it. (521)

2. They agreed yesterday morning to travel for a TWELVE-MONTH, and THAT DAY YEAR to meet again at Nanking station. (569; focus on that day year)

3. A tourist went to the mountains for sightseeing, and FELL AMONG robbers. (117)

4. No watch is SO accurate, BUT goes a BIT slower or quicker. (347; focus on so...but)

5. He is allowed to remain in his office DURING GOOD BEHAVIOUR. (100)

6. This affair set me A-thinking.
   They are of AN age
   (1; of also aground, aloft, etc., in the same entry)

7. I AM not USED TO such treatment.
   He USED TO go home on a bicycle.
   (605; no indication of awareness of seriousness of grammatical-cum-semantic contrast)

8. The origin of the ALPHABETS is now little thought of by modern writers. (284; focus on little thought of; standard interpretation with sense 'sets of letters' seems implausible)

9. MAY BE the day will come when all peoples of the world speak only one language. (300)

10. Most reptiles TAKE nothing in winter. (306)

11. A wiser man than you never existed IN THE WORLD. (546; focus on than...never)

12. I shall EVER take care of you so long as I live. (496; focus on so long as)

13. I cannot GO to see you, for I have something to do. (505; focus on something)

14. Examples of strange and/or clumsy usage include:

    The students dived into the water AS so many frogs. (44; focus on so many; either extremely clumsy/almost non-standard or with the ludicrous implication that they WERE frogs; ambiguous?)

    The DEPARTMENT HEAD OF THIS UNIVERSITY is not a position for life (140; focus on for life; note that there are three errors here, the use of the awkward expression the department head of this university itself, the category error involved in equating head (i.e.,

a person) and position, and the first the, which suggests that the university has only one department)

The student worked hard so that he might GET MORE KNOWLEDGE (519; focus on so that; characteristic Chinese concept of education not normally expressed in English)

There are very many examples of errors at the level of grammatical detail. the omission of plural -s may be exemplified by sentences such as:

It is on account of the frequency of AIR RAID that the window panes are plastered. (375; focus on on account of)

Errors involving articles may be exemplified by:

Owing to A trouble in his leg, he could not catch up with you and fell behind. (188; focus on fell behind; note also probable non-standard use of catch up ('keep up'), common in Hong Kong)

He will deliver a speech on THE social welfare. (374; focus on on).

Tense errors may be exemplified by:

The news of the victory SPREADS far and wide (123; focus on far and wide; has spread or is spreading seems to be intended).

The best weapons WOULD BE of no account if the men ARE reluctant to use them. (368; focus on of no account; tense mismatch)

As noted, there are also very many other types of error. See for instance:

ALL WHAT I have to say is mentioned above. (4; focus on above)

You act, as it were, a grown-up boy. (43; focus on as it were; either erroneous commas plus as if you were, or like omitted)

He plays well AT piano. (47)

I have not heard of him LONG SINCE. (285)

He pronounces no less DISTINCT than you do. (320; focus on no less...than)

In establishing a new factory, the PREVIOUS question is where to get the sufficient supply of material. (446; note also erroneous the with sufficient supply)

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